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THE FLAVOUR OF CRABBE

SOMEONE ONCE REMARKED that whenever a new book was published, he would take down an old one and read that instead. A thoroughly sensible attitude, for when acknowledged classics remain unread, why gamble one's time on books that will probably be worthless? If five or ten years later, one or two of those books are still highly regarded, then will be time enough to reconsider. The same holds true, of course, for minor writers of the past. As long as Dante remains untouched, the Russian novelists unread, and *Paradise Lost* read but twice, why should one choose to read an author whom obscurity has claimed for its own? Why, especially, should one recommend to public attention the works of George Crabbe, a poet who is usually considered to be of value only to the narrow specialist?

A proper reason can only be that such a writer has something especially interesting to offer, something that will repay the reader in new knowledge about human nature and art, and in a new kind of emotional experience. An even better reason will be that such a poet has something distinctive to offer, something not to be found in other writers and still worth finding. The poetry of Crabbe provides both of these.

II

Even an outline of Crabbe's life can be arresting, for his career in many ways was most extraordinary. Like the heroes of Horatio Alger, he rose from virtual rags and anonymity to enjoy a most comfortable income and an enviable fame, at least at the height of his career. He was born, in 1754, into a lower-middle-class family in the small port of Aldborough on the Suffolk coast, a few miles north of Ipswich. When of age, he was pushed into medicine by his father but was so poorly trained for it that he soon failed. On the strength of having sometimes tried his hand at casual versifying, he went to London with only £3 in his pocket and for months tried to find a publisher for the verses and prose he desperately turned out. He

failed again, and was rescued from debtor's prison and probable death only by the humanity of Edmund Burke, who took him in off the street and made him his protégé. Supported by Burke, he published a poem, entered holy orders, and returned to Aldborough as curate. But his rise was not yet complete, for from the mud-walled cottages of that seaside village he was then whisked to the marbled splendour of Belvoir Castle, in Leicestershire, where he served as chaplain to the Duke of Rutland. There in 1783 he published his first poem of lasting consequence, *The Village*, and in the same year he married the woman whom he had met ten years earlier and had been courting ever since.

He had risen too fast, however, and from Belvoir Castle he gladly moved to the rectory in a nearby parish, and in fact for the next twenty-two years he lived a very quiet and retiring life, as vicar or curate, in various small rural parishes in Leicestershire and Suffolk. During this time he published nothing of consequence, though all the while he was writing several poems and novels—all of which he burned. Finally, in 1807, he returned to publication with *The Parish Register*, and followed that with *The Borough* in 1810, and *Tales in Verse* in 1812. These together brought him public recognition as the principal poet of his age. Seven years later, in 1819, he published *Tales of the Hall* and received £3000 for the copyright to it and all his previous poems. After that he left a few scattered tales which were published as *Posthumous Tales* two years after his death, in 1834.

Although his career reads like a success story (in two stages), it was still shot through with the most bizarre and trying afflictions. Chief among these was the manic-depression which made his wife, over a period of fifteen years, sink gradually deeper and deeper into madness and eventual death. He was himself often afflicted with the monstrous nightmares that result from opium addiction, which he had unwittingly entered into in an attempt to cure a digestive ailment. After his wife's death in 1813 and his removal to Trowbridge, Wiltshire, he suffered acutely from loneliness, and in his efforts to escape from it he engaged in relatively harmless flirtations with various women. Still when he came to die, in 1832, he did so serenely, content with his life and confident of salvation.¹

III

Since for the most part, even in his tales, Crabbe described the life he observed round about him, his poetry contains many fascinating pictures of the way people lived in his day. *The Village* depicts, with a startling approach to realism, the life and sufferings of fishermen and rural labourers, impoverished and oppressed. *The Parish Register* explores the wide variety of character, fortune, and misfortune

that Crabbe saw in village and farm. *The Borough* broadens to describe the appearances and amusements, the moderately rich and the pitifully poor, of a fairly large seaside resort. And the various *Tales* range over the lives and characters of peasants and tradesmen, of spinsters and burgomasters. Consequently the reader is treated to the titillating differences between his life and theirs—and also to the disabusing similarities.

But a more remarkable aspect of Crabbe is that he combines two qualities rarely combined: he is a good poet and he is also a representative of the central moral tradition of orthodox Christianity—or at least of the Church of England. Most good English poets are heretical in one way or another, and whenever orthodox Christians try their hands at amateur versifying, the results are usually ghastly. Crabbe, however, succeeded in writing good poetry from a Christian point of view and on moral themes.

Basic to that poetry is the orthodox view that of course human nature is fallen and predominantly evil (cf. Article IX of the Church of England), and that all of us are members

Of a poor, blind, bewildered, erring race,
Who, a short time in varied fortune past,
Die and are equal in the dust at last.

(*The Village*, II.98-100.)

Partly as a result of this universal depravity, the world we live in is a hard one, and each one of us must experience much sickness and suffering, much grief and sorrow. But we can mitigate the hardness of our lot to some degree; we can fence round an island of comparative content if we are strenuously virtuous:

Toil, care, and patience bless th' abstemious few;
Fear, shame, and want the thoughtless herd pursue.

(*The Parish Register*, I.29-30.)

We can also help one another, and indeed we should. Since even the best of us have not taken every opportunity of doing good, or forgone every occasion of doing ill, we must all forgive and assist. Consequently Crabbe constantly pointed the need for charity. As an angry young man, he tried, in *The Village*, to awaken the rich to the shocking condition of the poor. In *The Parish Register* and *The Borough* he described his "fellow wanderers from the way of perfect rectitude" in such a manner as not only to offer a charitable warning to any who might be similarly tempted, but also, and more importantly, to prompt his readers to sympathy, pity, and love for those whose only sin was being like them.

After his early poems Crabbe added a piquant touch to his combination of good morals and good poetry. He quickly came to realize that moral didacticism—at least in poetry—almost never moves to charitable action. So while he continued to write about his favourite themes, he freely admitted that the most he could hope for was the establishment of a charitable attitude.

His moralism not only lived side by side with his poetry: it also influenced it—and often for the better. Admittedly it sometimes led him to distortion, as when, in arguing that a labourer by industry alone could almost guarantee himself comfort, he misrepresented the living conditions of the labourers he had observed.² But more often the same moralism improved his poetry. In the parts of *The Borough* describing the church, the inns, and the amusements, his moral attitude so affected his selection and description of details that there is in each of these parts a unity of theme and tone that would otherwise be lacking. His moralism in like manner often wisely led him to use types instead of individuals for his characters. Since in so doing he wished to impress on his readers the basic moral similarity between themselves and one of his characters, he of course avoided intruding any individualizing details that would have emphasized the differences between them. The result is to engage the readers' sympathies more directly and more deeply, and hence to create a much stronger effect. The prime example of this occurs in "The Patron," the fifth of the *Tales in Verse*. In this story of a young artist who is driven to insanity and death by the cruelty of a noble patron, the youth's father is presented simply as a father: although much of the tale is given over to him, only his paternal feelings in the various trying circumstances are represented, and as a result any parent, or any reader capable of imagining himself a parent, will respond freely and at once.

IV

I would not give the impression that Crabbe is without fault. It is remarkable, however, in view of his various shortcomings, which by their very number would have prevented many another man from becoming a poet at all, that the faults in his verse are so few. He was entirely without an ear for music; his sense of poetic rhythm appears to have been highly mechanical, for when composing he would move his hand up and down, counting the beats; he set himself a daily quota of thirty lines, which he felt obliged to meet, regardless of the ease or difficulty with which they came; and once his fame was established, he ceased to take care with his expression, slumping instead into a relaxed style and writing simply for the fun of it. The result of these shortcomings—or at least the product of a bad day—can be seen with particular clarity in the following lines, where Crabbe is simply insensible to

the ludicrous in both thought and content. One of his characters had cheated his brother: the victim

went to sea, and made his grog so strong
 He died before he could forgive the wrong.
 The rich man built a house, both large and high;
 He entered in and set him down to sigh;
 He planted ample woods and gardens fair,
 And walked with anguish and compunction there;
 The rich man's pines, to every friend a treat,
 He saw with pain, and he refused to eat;
 His daintiest food, his richest wines, were all
 Turned by remorse to vinegar and gall;
 The softest down, by living body pressed,
 The rich man bought, and tried to take his rest,
 But care had thorns upon his pillow spread,
 And scattered sand and nettles in his bed.

(*The Borough*, XVII.136-149.)

So bad a lapse, however, was fortunately rare, and Crabbe's poetic virtues overcame his shortcomings often enough to make close to one-fourth of his work still worth reading today—in contrast, it might be added, to Wordsworth's verse, of which very few people nowadays can bring themselves to read more than one-tenth.

V

In the better portion of his work, Crabbe demonstrates two qualities that are not only most interesting, but also distinctive, or virtually so. One of these is his ability to write well—and equally well—about either the humorous or the pathetic. This ability he shares, of course, with Shakespeare and Burns, but he directs it to characters in social strata not touched by either of these.

I would emphasize the large amount of humour and comedy to be found in Crabbe's writings, especially since the notion has got abroad that he is only a depressingly gloomy painter of nothing but pain and sorrow. Admittedly, since his humour runs the whole range of possible shadings, there is much that is dark, but it is a satiric, that is a comic, darkness. As one might expect from his view of human nature, he depicts the numerous vices indulged in by the criminal and the lewd—and the simply uncharitable. But often this satire, even when close to its darkest, is but mockingly ironic, as in his description of the poetic justice to be found in the life of Richard Monday. A bastard raised by the parish in its poorhouse, Richard quickly learned to do what was expected of him by his charitable society:

he stole

As others ordered, and without a dole;
 In all disputes, on either side he lied,
 And freely pledged his oath on either side;
 In all rebellions Richard joined the rest,
 In all detections Richard first confessed.
 Yet, though disgraced, he watched his time so well,
 He rose in favour when in fame he fell;
 Base was his usage, vile his whole employ,
 And all despised, and fed, the pliant boy.

Once out in the world, Richard Monday applied the lessons he had learned so well that he acquired vast wealth and a title. But in his will,

to his native place severely just,
 He left a pittance bound in rigid trust—
 Two paltry pounds, on every quarter's-day,
 (At church produced) for forty loaves should pay:
 A stinted gift, that to the parish shows
 He kept in mind their bounty and their blows.

(The Parish Register, 688-697; 761-766)

Not quite so mocking is Crabbe's description of Andrew Collett,

The blind, fat landlord of the Old Crown Inn—
 Big as his butt, and for the self-same use,
 To take in stores of strong fermenting juice.

(The Parish Register, III.75-124.)

And handled with an even lighter touch than this Falstaffian character is the Borough's vicar. His foibles are exposed with comedy that is now sly, now open, now non-committal. For example:

Habit with him was all the test of truth:
 "It must be right; I've done it from my youth."
 Questions he answered in as brief a way,
 "It must be wrong—it was of yesterday."

And when he came to die, Crabbe records, it could be said of the vicar:

Nor one so old has left this world of sin
 More like the being that he entered in.

(The Borough, III.5-8; 164-165.)

Three of Crabbe's tales are particularly funny, but since in them the humour derives much more from the detailed situation than from occasional phrasing, even less justice can be done to them by synopsis or brief quotation. "The Frank Court-

ship," for instance (which is the sixth of his *Tales in Verse*), narrates the courtship between a grave and puritanical young man and a rebellious young woman chosen for him from the same sect. But Crabbe's tongue-in-cheek attitude towards the whole affair can only be guessed at in any short quotation, such as these four lines describing the family's furnishings—though in them he manages to do a fair amount, by hinting that the mechanical repression to be found in those furnishings may well extend to the family itself:

Neat was their house; each table, chair, and stool
 Stood in its place, or moving moved by rule;
 No lively print or picture graced the room;
 A plain brown paper lent its decent gloom.

(ll.47-50.)

"The Preceptor Husband," which is the ninth of the *Tales of the Hall* and which is funnier still, relates the way in which a pretty young girl trapped a bookish young man into marrying her, by pretending that she just loved to be taught. As soon as the honeymoon was decently over, the husband attempted to be preceptor, provoking an exchange of dialogue that has to be read in its entirety for the comedy to be appreciated. "Flirtation", a separate miscellaneous piece, is perhaps the funniest of all, especially when stripped of its wordy introduction. It relates the dialogue between two women friends as one of them rehearses the excuses she will give to her returning fiancé for all the affairs she has had in his absence. A typical passage reads thus:

Delia: But for my brother: night and morn were you
 Together found, the inseparable two,
 Far from the haunts of vulgar prying men—
 In the old abbey—in the lonely glen—
 In the beech-wood—within the quarry made
 By hands long dead—with in the silent glade,
 Where the moon gleams upon the spring that flows
 By the grey willows as they stand in rows—
 Shall I proceed? There's not a quiet spot
 In all the parish where the pair were not
 Oft watched, oft seen. You must not so despise
 This weighty charge. Now, what will you devise?
Celia: "Her brother! What, sir? jealous of a child!
 A friend's relation! Why, the man is wild—
 A boy not yet at college! Come, this proves
 Some truth in you! This is a freak of Love's:
 I must forgive it, though I know not how

A thing so very simple to allow.
 Pray, if I meet my cousin's little boy,
 And take a kiss, would that your peace annoy?
 But I remember Delia—yet, to give
 A thought to this is folly, as I live—
 But I remember Delia made her prayer
 That I would try and give the boy an air;
 Yet awkward he, for all the pains we took—
 A bookish boy, his pleasure in a book;
 And since the lad is grown to man's estate,
 We never speak—your bookish youth I hate.”
Delia: Right! and he cannot tell, with all his art,
 Our father's will compelled you both to part.
 (ll. 220-249.)

VI

As will be readily recognized from these samples, the constant basis of Crabbe's comedy is satire. However dark or however light, his comedy issues from a perception of the way in which an individual deviates from the norm of virtuous common sense. Curiously enough, his poems of pathos are based on the same perception, carried one step further. Whenever, because of fortune or the failure either of the individual or of society to behave with virtuous common sense, someone suffers or even simply falls short of the modest contentment he might otherwise have expected, Crabbe pities him, and so do we.

Understandably, Crabbe depicts many such sufferers, since the poor and the old were always before him, the unfortunate and the bereaved, the deluded and the morally frail. All of them Crabbe pitied, and to them extended his charity. But often his sympathy is mingled with a feeling of indignation that the cause of their suffering should be allowed to exist. That receptacle of social cast-offs, the village workhouse, for instance, he describes thus:

Theirs is yon house that holds the parish poor,
 Whose walls of mud scarce bear the broken door;
 There, where the putrid vapours, flagging, play,
 And the dull wheel hums doleful through the day—
 There children dwell, who know no parents' care;
 Parents, who know no children's love, dwell there!
 Heart-broken matrons on their joyless bed,
 Forsaken wives, and mothers never wed;
 Dejected widows with unheeded tears,
 And crippled age with more than childhood fears;

The lame, the blind, and, far the happiest they!
The moping idiot and the madman gay.

(*The Village*, l.228-239.)

Crabbe observed various kinds of insanity in his own life: his father's brain rotted with drink, his wife sank into manic-depression, he himself suffered the nightmares of opium addiction, and undoubtedly he observed several village idiots. Accordingly he was well able to arouse pathos at the sight of madness, as he has done here and as he does to a much greater extent with three of his narrative characters: Sir Eustace Grey, the victim of demoniac pursuers; Peter Grimes, who is haunted by the ghosts of those he killed; and Edward Shore (perhaps the saddest of them all), who is reduced from genius to idiocy.

Much of the pathos Crabbe arouses in his various poems is mixed with the sentimental, especially when he describes uncharitable treatment, such as that afforded the aged poor, worn out from honest toil and now begrudged even a crust and a rag. The sentiment is of course to be expected, for Crabbe wrote in the midst of the sentimental movement and was in many ways a man of his age. But sometimes he was able to go beyond the usual and the unexpected, and expand not only the amount but also the kind of pathos. Twice, for instance, he doubles the source of pathos, by turning charitably from the victims of a villain to the villain himself. Peter Grimes, after arousing the reader's sympathy for the boys he mistreats, himself becomes an object of pity with his terrifying hallucinations; and in the tale "The Brothers" the offending Isaac, who is largely responsible for the suffering of his brother George, by his own subsequent contrition makes us feel that he is suffering even more. In all these instances of pathos aroused in narrative, it would be futile to quote excerpts, for the source of pathos, even more than that of comedy, is misrepresented if not properly built up, and Crabbe is particularly apt at building up to his final effect.

VII

The most distinctive aspect of Crabbe's ability to write equally well in both the humorous and the pathetic veins is his occasional ability to do both in the one piece. Since his comedy and his pathos share a common basis, it is perhaps not surprising that he should be able to combine such seemingly opposed kinds of content, but it remains exceedingly difficult to combine the emotional effects of this disparate content in such a way that the short poem containing them may still be aesthetically unified. Yet Crabbe succeeds. In "The Parish Clerk," for instance (Letter XIX of *The Borough*), he begins by making fun of the hero's puritanical virtue. So ob-

noxious is this virtue to a group of wastrels that they set an attractive girl on him who is to pretend to have a religious problem:

With tender tremblings and seducing tears,
She might such charms of various kind display
That he would feel their force and melt away.

But they fail:

She came, she spake: he calmly heard her case,
And plainly told her 'twas a want of grace;
Bade her "such fancies and affections check,
And wear a thicker muslin on her neck."

(ll. 98-100; 106-109.)

Then Crabbe abruptly changes his tone, prepares us carefully for the clerk's decision to steal from the money given to the poor, and relates his agonizing exposure. After this the clerk slowly wears away his life in gnawing isolation, shunning and shunned. At last the vicar relents and seeks out his lodging place in a wretched loft, but it is too late, for the clerk,

as the vicar of his state inquired,
Turned to the wall and silently expired.

A later tale, "Delay Has Danger" (the thirteenth of the *Tales of the Hall*), likewise begins in high-spirited fun. In it Crabbe even achieves a Byronic mock-innocence when he asks, of the accidental meetings of an apparently artless young maiden and a youth who is affianced to another, absent woman:

Now, of the meeting of a modest maid
And sober youth why need we be afraid?
And when a girl's amusements are so few
As Fanny's were, what would you have her do?
Reserved herself, a decent youth to find,
And just be civil, sociable, and kind,
And look together at the setting sun,
Then at each other—what the evil done?

(ll. 253-260.)

The situation leads gradually to a point where the hero is compromised by the maiden's guardians, and where, although the scene is tremendously funny, we also begin to feel sorry for the poor manoeuvred boy. Subtly Crabbe leads us on through the marriage to the pathos of the hero's realizing his folly and having it driven home

to him. Step by step, but almost with a show of carelessness, Crabbe has led us from near one end of the spectrum to near the other.

In two or three other pieces Crabbe attains to an even greater achievement, for in them he fuses the two feelings of satiric comedy and pathos, creating both at the same time. Take for example this description of the principal players at the Borough's card game:

Others there are, the veterans of the game,
 Who owe their pleasure to their envied fame;
 Through many a year, with hard-contested strife,
 Have they attained this glory of their life.
 Such is that ancient burgess, whom in vain
 Would gout and fever on his couch detain;
 And that large lady, who resolves to come,
 Though a first fit has warned her of her doom.
 These are as oracles: in every cause
 They settle doubts, and their decrees are laws;
 But all are troubled when, with dubious look,
 Diana questions what Apollo spoke.

(*The Borough*, X.125-136.)

We smile at the folly of their perverted values, but at the same time we also pity them for their folly. In "Procrastination," the fourth of his *Tales in Verse*, Crabbe maintains this fusion of satire and pathos over a much longer stretch. The tale concerns two young lovers who are prevented from marrying by the wishes of the wealthy widow who is the girl's aunt and guardian. Rupert, the suitor, reluctantly leaves the country, going abroad to seek his fortune so that when the aunt dies he may marry the girl. She remains dutiful to her aunt's wishes and whims, and gradually absorbs her mercenary attitudes. When the aunt dies, Dinah takes care not to let Rupert know, and instead gives her whole attention to the estate left her by the aunt. Her attitude at this point Crabbe sums up in two couplets which flash with ambiguous glintings of satire and moral pathos. The first tells how

She knew that mothers grieved, and widows wept,
 And she was sorry, said her prayers, and slept.

Viciously uncharitable, yes—and also pathetic. The other couplet is part of the description of a handsome clock that Dinah owned, a clock of which Crabbe says that

while on brilliants moved the hands of steel,
 It clicked from prayer to prayer, from meal to meal.

From here he moves through many similar ambiguities to the chilling and inevitable conclusion, itself an epitome of pathos and satire.

VIII

The other distinctive quality of Crabbe is his peculiar use of natural description. Early in his career he perceived and drew attention to the parallel which nature can offer to man. His aged villager, forced to labour outdoors in the bitter winter, complains that,

Like leaves in spring, the young are blown away,
Without the sorrows of a slow decay;
I, like yon withered leaf, remain behind,
Nipped by the frost and shivering in the wind;
There it abides till younger buds come on,
As I, now all my fellow-swains are gone;
Then, from the rising generation thrust,
It falls, like me, unnoticed to the dust.

(*The Village*, I. 208-215.)

Such description is free, of course, from the mawkish inaccuracy of which Ruskin so properly complained in the device he called the pathetic fallacy. Crabbe does not falsify his Nature by attributing to it human emotions; instead he finds in Nature a scene which provides a remarkable parallel to a human situation, and which presents us with both the scene and the parallel. In a later passage he found a much more detailed counterpart, an awesomely accurate parallel to a human mind from which insanity has slowly ebbed:

. . . as vapours move
Dense and reluctant from the wintry grove,
All is confusion till the morning light
Gives the dim scene obscurely to the sight;
More and yet more defined the trunks appear,
Till the wild prospect stands distant and clear—
So the dark mind of our young poet grew
Clear and sedate; the dreadful mist withdrew,
And he resembled that bleak wintry scene,
Sad, though unclouded; dismal, though serene.

(“The Patron,” ll. 644-653.)

Here Crabbe has spelled out his parallel to the fullest extent. In his tale of the Parish Clerk, however, he was content simply to place his outcast in the midst of natural scenery and let his reader feel for himself how appropriate that scenery is:

In each lone place, dejected and dismayed,
Shrinking from view, his wasting form he laid;
Or to the restless sea and roaring wind

Gave the strong yearnings of a ruined mind.
 On the broad beach, the silent summer-day,
 Stretched on some wreck, he wore his life away;
 Or where the river mingles with the sea,
 Or on the mud-bank by the elder-tree,
 Or by the bounding marsh-dyke, there was he.
 (*The Borough*, XIX.270-278.)

The sea and the wind, the desolate beach and the isolated wreck, the sea again and the lonely dyke—all these are accepted for themselves and at the same time reflect the mind and feelings of the shattered outcast.

The essential distinctiveness of this use of Nature can be seen best in comparison. Tennyson, who learned much from Crabbe and who also made potent use of natural description, provided the following setting for the apocalyptic destruction of King Arthur's realm. The King and his army have pushed their pagan enemies back to

A land of old upheaven from the abyss
 By fire, to sink into the abyss again;
 Where fragments of forgotten peoples dwelt,
 And the long mountains ended in a coast
 Of ever-shifting sand, and far away
 The phantom circle of a moaning sea. . . .
 And there, that day when the great light of heaven
 Burn'd at his lowest in the rolling year,
 On the waste sand by the waste sea they closed. . . .
 A death-white mist slept over sand and sea,
 Whereof the chill, to him who breathed it, drew
 Down with his blood, till all his heart was cold
 With formless fear

. . . when dolorous day
 Grew drearier toward twilight falling, came
 A bitter wind, clear from the north, and blew
 The mist aside, and with that wind the tide
 Rose, and the pale King glanced across the field
 Of battle. But no man was moving there;
 Nor any cry of Christian heard thereon,
 Nor yet of heathen; only the wan wave
 Brake in among dead faces, to and fro
 Swaying the helpless hands, and up and down
 Tumbling the hollow helmets of the fallen,
 And shiver'd brands that once had fought with Rome,

And rolling far along the gloomy shores
 The voice of days of old and days to be.
 ("The Passing of Arthur," ll. 82-135.)

After this highly effective, and perhaps sublime, description, it may appear strange indeed to compare with it a passage of Crabbe's that is pitched in a much lower key. At least there is a certain similarity of content which may justify the comparison. The passage appears in the tale "Delay has Danger," referred to above, at the point where Crabbe wishes to change the mood from comedy to pathos. The hero, Henry by name, has just been trapped into a dishonourable marriage, and the thought of the ostracism that awaits him has begun to bear in upon him:

That evening all in fond discourse was spent,
 When the sad lover to his chamber went,
 To think on what had past, to grieve and to repent.
 Early he rose, and looked with many a sigh
 On the red light that filled the eastern sky.
 Oft had he stood before, alert and gay,
 To hail the glories of the new-born day,
 But now dejected, languid, listless, low,
 He saw the wind upon the water blow,
 And the cold stream curled onward as the gale
 From the pine-hill blew harshly down the dale.
 On the right side the youth a wood surveyed,
 With all its dark intensity of shade;
 Where the rough wind alone was heard to move,
 In this, the pause of nature and of love,
 When now the young are reared, and when the old,
 Lost to the tie, grow negligent and cold.
 Far to the left he saw the huts of men,
 Half hid in mist, that hung upon the fen;
 Before him swallows, gathering for the sea,
 Took their short flights, and twittered on the lea;
 And near, the bean-sheaf stood, the harvest done,
 And slowly blackened in the sickly sun;
 All these were sad in nature, or they took
 Sadness from him, the likeness of his look
 And of his mind—he pondered for a while,
 Then met his Fanny with a borrowed smile.
 ("Delay Has Danger," ll. 698-724.)

The first thing to be noticed about these two descriptions is that Crabbe has presented the whole of his scene and has done so in the order in which Henry him-

self would have observed it, whereas Tennyson has used fragments only and has interwoven them into a narrative, but not pictorial, whole. Tennyson has used his pieces of scenery to project, and indeed define, the human situation, but Crabbe has respected nature as he found it and has preserved it whole, discovering in it a wealth of parallels to Henry's plight. The general mood of the scene reflects Henry's mood, and the symbolic ambiguities of such individual facets as the "dark intensity of shade" and the "swallows gathering for the sea" reinforce the impression of despondency and foreshadow his flight into oblivion.

Even details of the two descriptions reveal the same difference in approach. Tennyson's "land of old" appears to be created, not found, and especially in its details of the "forgotten peoples" and the "ever-shifting sand" (both of which are rather hard to accept literally), it appears to be created more for the moral allegory than even for the fitting of background to conflict. Crabbe's "fen," on the other hand, with its isolated "huts of men," belongs to the scene and only in addition suggests a parallel. In choosing as his day of battle that one—out of the whole year—on which "the great light of heaven/Burn'd at his lowest," Tennyson proved artificially selective, whereas Crabbe's season of "the pause of nature and of love" belongs to the whole autumnal scene and adds a thought of isolation that is naturally appropriate. Tennyson's description of the mist, not only death-white and sleeping but also productive of a fear-creating chill, is rather overdone in comparison with Crabbe's simple and accurate line, "Half hid in mist, that hung upon the fen." Even the timing of Tennyson's "bitter wind," delayed thoughtfully till evening, appears contrived beside Crabbe's harsh gale so natural to a dreary and damp fall morning. And Tennyson's climactic "wan wave" that "brake in among dead faces" has been invented simply so that the corpses could be set in it, in order to show their helplessness and utter ruin. In contrast, the equally important "bean-sheaf" that "slowly blackened in the sickly sun" is wholly native to the scene, is expected in it, and is also the object that the viewer's eyes would naturally settle on—and yet how evocative it is as well.

With Crabbe the natural scene has been accepted on its own terms, accepted and presented as it actually was, and then there has been seen in it a reflection of the human situation. With Tennyson the scene, fragmentary as it is, has been fabricated: a scene such as never really was, it has been contrived and used—to excellent effect—solely to shadow forth the human, and more importantly the allegorical, situation. Crabbe has seen in Nature something wonderfully ironic: that a misty fen on a stormy autumn day should reflect, in such minute detail, the forlorn

situation of a human being. Crabbe has also perceived, and felt, his ironic vision with profound charity for the human character so completely revealed by it. Tennyson has constructed a fabrication and applied it skilfully. Certainly Tennyson's description is superior in sensual diction and the movement of its verse, but in Crabbe's description, for all its halting rhythms and awkward phrases, there is a power that pulls at the heart. It is a power of love—a love for nature, for nature as it exists in its cold dreariness and vain fruition, and a love for man, for man as he too exists, even in his folly and stupidity. It is this love for both that enables Crabbe to see his vision of man reflected in Nature, a quiet vision, but nobler in its way than Tennyson's dream of "shiver'd brands that once had fought with Rome."

NOTES

1. Anyone who would like to pursue Crabbe's life further should read *The Life of the Rev. George Crabbe* by his son (published first in 1834 and since republished in 1933 and 1947), *George Crabbe and his Times, 1754-1832* by René Huchon (London, 1907), and *The Romance of an Elderly Poet* by A. M. Broadley and Walter Jerrold (London, 1913).
2. The evidence for this statement I have presented in a longer (and forthcoming) study of Crabbe's descriptive realism.